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THE GRADATION OF BIBLE LESSONS.

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THERE is a natural sense in all teachers which tells them that their teaching needs to be adapted to the mental condition of the pupils. This agrees with the demand which professional educators make for graded lessons and methods. But the educators have not defined very clearly just what gradation involves when applied to Scripture study; and the natural sense of teachers can hardly be expected to guide them unerringly—although some teachers, if left to their instincts, would do far better work than is possible for them when they are tied down to a course which neither science nor instinct has attempted to grade. But a still worse guide than instinct is that science so-called which is *a priori*, and which considers only the theological or moral inferences to be drawn from the Scripture, and not at all the mental states of the pupils or the way in which those states are affected.

Those who teach are adults. So also are those who choose and arrange the lessons or direct the main lines of study. The Bible itself is an adult book, at least in its literary form, and to a large extent also in its thought and in its moral and spiritual import. The natural approach to it would therefore be from the adult standpoint. Men and women with their mental outlook and habits established, and with convictions clearly defined, approach the Bible for themselves and present it to others, not as a new thing to be acquired, but as an exercise for the higher powers and as a correction and supporter of conviction and habit. So in lessons for adults the questions of grading do not arise in the same way as in lessons for children.

With the infant class, or children of kindergarten age, the adult conditions are completely reversed. The five-year-old not only cannot read the Bible, or understand when another reads it; he has not yet acquired the power to apprehend moral and spiritual meanings such as the Bible chiefly bears. The best that can be done for him is to develop and diversify the awakening physical senses, and familiarize those senses with some of the most suitable objects from which

he shall afterward draw moral and spiritual meanings. His seeing develops earlier than his hearing, and holds attention more successfully. A simple picture or object may be made interesting in itself, because there is a delight in seeing — in the mere exercise of the senses. But it may also be made interesting by what it represents. There must be only one leading theme for each lesson. Other parts should reveal some connection with the theme, but the relation must not be subtle or merely logical. It must be plain even to superficiality, and should reinforce the main impression.

With a teacher's help the children may see a clear and simple image of a few persons and objects from the Bible, but they will not understand characters or delineations of moral character. They are not ready for any moralizing, any abstraction, or any putting together of elements or ideas to make a complex whole. They cannot memorize well or master details of any kind. A crowded picture confuses them, and long lessons and numerous instructions weary them without ever finding them.

There is little virtue in the connection between successive lessons, or in questions of time and place. The Bible cannot be graded down to children of the kindergarten age. Some of its objects, like those from the book of real life, may be given them to practice their perceptive powers on, to broaden their vision, and to open up new brain-cells which shall give power to later years. But it can scarcely be called a Bible lesson when it is properly adapted for this age. And yet the work done at this period probably has more to do with the powers and interests of after-life than that done at any later period.

The real problems involved in the gradation of pupils and Bible lessons arise from the variations of the growing inner life between the ages of six and twenty-one. Between the standpoint of the kindergarten child and that of the mature adult there are at least four degrees of mental condition covering the sixteen years. A larger number may be easily made out, but no smaller number will do. They are not very sharply defined, and there are individual differences which cannot be provided for in any general scheme. Yet, disregarding a few exceptional cases of precocity and arrested development, the grades are marked off by some very important characteristics peculiar to each.

These characteristics are stubborn facts of human nature, and any instruction which disregards them must suffer serious disadvantage and is likely to do harm. These facts of mental condition must be the starting-point, not only for the grading of classes, but also for the

selection of lesson material, and for its preparation and presentation. Moreover, these facts ought to be understood in common by those who select, those who edit, and those who teach the lessons. They need to be appreciated by those who superintend the schools and attend to the promotions from grade to grade. The promotions ought to be made on the basis of the mental conditions so far as ascertainable, rather than by the years of age. Yet even lack of proficiency in the work of a grade should not keep a pupil in that grade unduly. When grades are here described by years of age, it means the mental states which usually occur at that age.

When the child is six to eight years old he still retains many of the characteristics of the previous period. He is still growing rapidly, and that is his chief business. Everything else must be made subsidiary to right growth. The brain is now finishing its rapid growth and reaches practically its full weight. The main outlines of mind and character are rapidly taking form. It is the last opportunity easily and naturally to amplify the physical basis for future high attainment. Later enlargements of the plan come like afterthoughts in the plan of a great structure; they are difficult to co-ordinate. Every new sense-perception at this period opens new chambers in the brain which later instruction can fill; but if the chambers are not opened now, it will be difficult afterward either to open or to fill them. This representation is of course partly figurative, and yet it is almost literal, for without a richly varied sense-perception in early childhood, there are comparatively few brain-cells which ever develop beyond the original latent possibility of a cell. The result is an inferior brain, which can never support anything but an inferior mind and character.

Hitherto the broadest avenue to the inner sanctuary of the child's life has been through his eye, but now an approach by way of the ear is rapidly becoming the more important. He has learned so many words now that he can form a mental image of many things merely by hearing about them, although he is greatly helped by seeing also. But his mental content is little else than images unrelated—percepts unappceived. The vigorous power of imitation and imagination multiplies the image in endless combination. The action of body and mind is spontaneous, unregulated, and playful. It needs much freedom and little restraint. Such restraint as is necessary should be firm and uniform, but the free play of all the powers is essential for their health and growth. Imitation and suggestion must be chiefly relied on in guiding the acts and processes of this period. But those who

furnish the example and the suggestion must bear the air and prestige of intelligent and unquestioned authority; for by this time the child's manner of responding to authority is getting permanently fixed, and obedience is an elementary essential.

What does the Bible offer that is useful to children from six to eight years old? In choosing lessons for such minds and in teaching them, the question is not what the essentials of salvation are, nor is it as to the great men or books or landmarks of the Bible, or their connection or chronology. The question is rather: What biblical words, objects, and persons can be brought within the range of their senses so as to produce in them new mental images or perceptions? To what portion of the Bible is it possible to introduce them? Immediate religious or moral results are not to be looked for, nor even intellectual results which can be exhibited. They are now acquiring the alphabet of biblical lore, by which in after-years they shall become familiar with its content and sensitive to its impressions. That alphabet consists of the words, names, and phrases which are recognized as biblical, the mental pictures and the peculiar aroma with which one needs to be familiar in opening the Scriptures, and the lack of which so soon betrays itself.

These children do not read as yet; they only look and listen. Stories are read or told to them more in their own dialect than in the language of Scripture, but introducing such biblical words as will be understood by their connection. Explanations do not explain to them. If the story is in their language, they understand it; if not, nothing can make it find them. They can see that king Saul tried to kill David, and that Saul of Tarsus punished the followers of Jesus, but afterward became one himself: yet, if they are not brought together in needless confusion it is of no consequence whether the two Sauls are the same, or which was before the other and how long; for these are matters of relation, and so belong in a later grade. Questions of morals and of miracles are also likely to be beyond them. Their stories are of persons or things in action; they are concrete and tangible. It is not intended that they shall teach lessons, but rather that the words and conspicuous figures shall become familiar friends to the children. The stories will, of course, contain ethical and psychological elements, and the more the better; but these are not to be made much of in this grade. It is not for these elements that the stories are selected, but for their externals. What is now sought is a first acquaintance with stories which will afterward prove rich in their inner elements. The story is not long or complicated in plot. The objects and actions are

such as the children are familiar with, or can easily be made so. There is one main act or incident which can be quickly told and many times retold. It is told each time in substantially the same words, for it is the words now rather than the events which make the impression. It is selected partly with a view to its being finally reproduced by the children; but this must not be expected too early, and in some cases not until the next grade is reached. Responses to the teacher's questions, must, for the most part, be brief answers of facts stated in the story, not the result of reflection. Narrative portions of both the Old and the New Testaments abound in material which can be adapted for this grade; and yet very few parts are suitable as they stand in the common versions.

A passage from the epistles or the prophets assigned as a lesson for this grade will be taken by the children as an infant takes meat when it is offered. In the nature of things, they have a right to expect from their elders such food as is suited for them. When a stone is given for bread, they do not know what to do with it, and they simply do nothing. If the practice is persisted in, they grow sick and famished without understanding their own condition. This is a widely prevailing condition, which explains many discouraging facts of religious life. Passages from the laws, philosophy, poetry, and history of national movements and issues are very apt to produce like results, as also many other sections of Scripture which for later life will have the highest value, such as the new covenant of Jeremiah and the discourses of Jesus. Uniform lessons must deprive older grades of this best of all material, or else in presenting it, ignore the mental capacities of this grade.

Another convenient grade, commonly called "junior," is found in children of nine to twelve years inclusive, and there are many of thirteen and some of fourteen years who still retain the qualities of this grade and have not passed on to adolescence. In the discipline of life there are special tasks for this period. It is pre-eminently the time for drill and drudgery, for rigid training, for storing the memory, for keeping alive and developing the childish imagination, for confirming habits of conduct and of brain-functioning. Many things may now be made automatic which will serve and safeguard the after-life; or, failing this, the later life will be vacillating and filled with vexatious uncertainties and dangers.

Mental powers have increased noticeably, though many traits of the former period still survive. It is still the concrete action and

events that hold attention, but there is now some voluntary control over attention. This power of control must be helped and not overtaxed, for it is fundamental in education. Things that interest are to be drafted into the service and made to support attention to less absorbing objects.

Successive lessons now need an orderly connection. Superficial connections will no longer answer. The unities of time and place and subject are all required. There must likewise be well-marked courses with the enthusiasm of new beginnings and progressive stages, and the satisfaction of arriving at a definite end. Some distinguished personage furnishes a good connecting base on which to build a series of lessons. This is the time for laying the long warp threads for a foundation into which the after-years shall weave the ever-increasing richness of figure and detail drawn from the great design of history. No mere outline will serve here. In fact, outlines are final and not initial studies. They are designed to give order and proportion to a mass of details already acquired, and if offered earlier they are meaningless and disheartening.

While lower grades have been occupied with personages and events of the Bible, selected not for their order of succession, but for their fitness for the child's mind, this grade affords the opportunity for establishing a connected and consecutive view of the whole succession of Bible history. There must still be a careful sifting of the material to avoid those portions of Scripture and those subjects of study which are beyond the reach of this grade, such as Paul's epistles, most of the prophecies, and the problems of national and institutional life. A few of the most elementary moral and religious truths may be drawn from the concrete incidents; but they must be stated in positive, even in dogmatic forms, involving no demand for logical and abstract reasoning. Practical maxims stated in general terms will suit the mind, and after these are well fixed comes the proper time for modifications, rational connections, and exceptions.

The whole period of this grade ought to be occupied with one thorough and consecutive course covering the whole Bible, the first three-fourths of which ought to be on the Old Testament and the last one-fourth on the New Testament. It is the one period of a lifetime when the dramatic scenes and great figures of the Bible can be rehearsed over and over, and idealized with the halo of youthful love and enthusiasm which make them an abiding and molding force in character. Constant review and back reference should keep the mate-

rial fresh, but the whole Bible should be covered in one steadily progressive course. Numerous goings over it are sure to be confusing. Memory is at its best and should be stored up to the limit of its capacity with concrete material in orderly and accurate, though largely undigested, form. The mind is never again so capable of just this kind of hard work; and the more of this work you can get a child to do, the more respect he will have for you, as well as for himself.

The pupil's readings in his own Bible, however, ought to be culled with much care and pedagogical-skill. The damage done to his interest by laboring wearily through chapters of material which means nothing to him is incalculable. He soon concludes that the Bible as a whole is stupid, and it is doubtful if that conclusion can ever be completely reversed. On the other hand, if his incursions are wisely guided from the first, the Bible grows upon him until it becomes an absorbing interest.

Scripture language may now be used quite freely in telling the stories, though some lessons can be made effective when translated into colloquial language, which would not find a ten-year-old as they stand in the Bible. The best teaching exercise for this grade is the repeated telling of each story by every pupil with constant effort at accuracy and preferably using the same language.

Still allowing for variations of early and late development, there are enough of common characteristics in young people from thirteen to sixteen years of age to define a particular grade of lessons. Here is the transition from the child to the adult; there is a strange mingling of the qualities of both, and they cannot be ignored or eliminated. They constitute a stage of growth which must be provided for with the utmost care. Sympathies and emotions are strong. Opinions are arbitrary and dogmatic. Moral impulses now begin to be strongly felt, but they are only in isolated instances and with utter lack of uniformity. The will is now arriving at rational self-consciousness and it functions irregularly. There are the beginnings of a power to think abstractly, to speculate, and to generalize. Sweeping generalities must be expected and not sharply limited. It is a time for the practice of judgment and not for finely correcting it.

The most important fact of all is that in this period the religious nature awakens. The ethical and emotional fronts which are now taking form have a natural exposure toward the sunlight of heaven. If the grateful light finds a fair and unobstructed way to the soul now, there will be a rapid growth in that direction, often accompanied by a

climax of intense emotion. The effort ought not to be to intensify religious passion, as when one emerging from darkness is dazzled by an electric light. The illumination should rather be diffused steadily through the whole being and into all its experiences, as when one awakens in the dawn of a fair day. But this cannot be except as the mind has been previously well stored with material which readily lends itself to religious and ethical interpretation. Biblical characters and deeds already acquired for their own sake now become available for a higher religious use, just as material objects reflect and diffuse the sunlight.

Jesus Christ and the gospel story of his teaching furnish the chief Scripture material for this grade. It is not yet time for the philosophical or the profounder theological questions; but the irrepressible conflict between love and selfishness, between faith and sin, are now the subjects for long and deep thought. Calvary makes its deepest impression. Heroes are chosen for their moral worth, and they mold the ideals for life. Perverted heroes can be dethroned only by more real and more noble heroes. Some of the prophets may be presented as the moral heroes of their time. It is the age of hero-worship and of enthusiasm, and so some of the Psalms may be presented with this in view. The main facts about the origin of the biblical books, their preservation and translation, may now be taught to advantage, as may also the simplest connected view of doctrine. The things commonly believed can now be presented with confidence, and they will not awaken doubts as they may in the next period. There are long periods of silent reflection, and it is important that both healthful food for that reflection and wise guidance in it shall be constantly furnished.

Teaching by subjects is better suited for this than for any previous grade, but the subjects must not be too abstract. A subject like the kingdom in people and parables, or the prophets *versus* the kings, can be followed through several weeks or months far better than such a subject as the cardinal virtues or the evidences of Christianity. It is now that the Spirit is revealing the things of Christ, and for this the teaching work should prepare the way. As the seed grows silently day and night when undisturbed and in favorable conditions, so the divine Spirit is now steadily germinating a new life in the soul; but examinations of its work are fraught with dangers, for it has not yet learned to testify of itself.

In the later period of youth, from about seventeen to twenty-one,

the mind gives itself unreservedly to speculation, and as it is venturesome people who meet with adventures, so these have many experiences, some of which are new and surprising, but all are informing. Splendid ideals meet with sudden collapse. The creations of fancy are having to square themselves with hard reality. It is a period of readjustment, and of gaining wisdom by experience. There has lately been a new birth, and the social and ethical relations of this period correspond with the sensory and motor reactions of the period following the first birth. One learns to discriminate between things hitherto supposed to be alike, and to exercise a less sweeping and more critical judgment. Reflection continues and becomes more intense and decisive. Its conclusions are radical, and they seem final; but they do not remain so.

There may now be a beginning of that study known as biblical theology. The doctrinal import of different portions of Scripture may be drawn out and compared. Paul's epistles now begin to have a meaning. Job has a new interest in addition to that of the dramatic tale. The philosophy of evil and of moral responsibility is deeply interesting. The origin of institutions and their laws, constitutions, and social significance are a good study now when the social consciousness is awakening. The literary study of the Scripture may be introduced at this period, and will add greatly to its meaning and interest.

As for the gradation of lessons for adult minds, little may be said. While they have passed out of the rapidly changing mental states of childhood and are apt to be confirmed in somewhat permanent habits of mental and moral reaction, there is even less uniformity between them than among children. Save for those affinities which afford a little natural selection, there are all varieties to be found in each class. If the kinds of study proposed for the two preceding grades have not been followed, almost any of them may be used with a little readjustment. But it is not fair to adults to give them repeatedly the same courses, as if there were nothing else for them, when, in fact, the material ready and at hand for them is unlimited; and this is really the only grade of which this can be said. They are prepared to take new books and the current literature of the Bible as a basis for their study, and so to obtain an ever-broadening horizon and deeper insight. There ought to be plans and opportunities for the promotion of such adult study in every community.